

ABSOLUT ELYX PRESENTS

WOMEN OF INTEGRITY



16 WOMEN FROM 16 COUNTRIES
PHOTOGRAPHS BY JOHAN LINDBERG TEXT BY KENZA FOURATI

ABSOLUT ELYX & VOGUE ITALIA PRESENT WOMEN OF INTEGRITY

ABSOLUT ELYX CREATIVE DIRECTOR—JOHAN LINDEBERG
VOGUE ITALIA, EDITOR-IN-CHIEF—FRANCA SOZZANI

ABSOLUT ELYX AND VOGUE ITALIA PROUDLY PRESENT “WOMEN OF INTEGRITY”, a photography exhibition by Johan Lindeberg, Creative Director of Absolut new luxury vodka. The exhibition, debuting during New York Fashion Week, features the portraits of 16 inspiring women from 16 different countries. Women from around the world with a wide range of experiences, achievements, voices and visions. They represent the diverse strength of the women of the world today, and how they lead their lives with integrity in the current global climate. The 16 women have been portrayed in large black and white exhibition prints by Lindeberg and profiled in interviews by Kenza Fourati in a special newsprint magazine available to guests at the launch event. Among them are personalities as different as Cuban activist Yoani Sánchez, Dr. Bahija Jallal, Executive Vice President of MedImmune, responsible for biologics research, development and clinical activities, and Elif Şafak, one of Turkey’s most distinctive voices, who is also the country’s bestselling female writer. Absolut Elyx Creative Director Johan Lindeberg said: “We currently live in a world of turmoil, and it’s time for women to take the lead. I am proud to bring together 16 women from 16 different countries to convey their progressive and powerful voices. I’ve learned so much by spending time with them and I admire how they were able to stay focussed on their goals and the integrity they have shown through their individual paths. Special thanks to Franca Sozzani, for her international mindset, beautiful values and her efforts to empower women, to Kenza Fourati, for her passion and support to make this project alive, and finally to Jonas Tåhlin with Absolut Elyx for taking a bold, new path in the liquor industry by supporting projects with real depth and integrity.” “Raising public awareness of the fact that social commitment is a fundamental duty for each one of us, especially for women, who have an increasingly decisive role to play in decision making. Offering examples of women who take a precise stand, with conviction. These were the motivations that guided me through this project. The 16 women portrayed by Johan Lindeberg represent 16 different countries, 16 different views on how to tackle the problems the world faces today. With integrity, with determination. Sixteen voices, one purpose: to help awaken civil conscience,” said Franca Sozzani, Editor-in-Chief of “Vogue Italia”. The women featured in the exhibition include: Hiam Abbass, a Palestinian actress, Iris Berben, a German actress, Dora Bouchoucha, a Tunisian film producer, Staceyann Chin, a Jamaican poet and LGBT activist, Melanie De Biasio, a Belgian musician, Sandra den Hamer, a Dutch museum director, Bahija Jallal, a Moroccan cancer research executive, Nadine Labaki, a Lebanese actress and director, Blanca Li, a Spanish choreographer, Ofelia Medina, a Mexican actress, singer and screenwriter, Shirin Neshat, an Iranian artist, Prune Nourry, a French artist, Patricia Pillar, a Brazilian actress, Princess Rym of Jordan, Yoani Sánchez, a Cuban activist, and Elif Şafak, a Turkish writer.



BLANCA LI

An Almodóvar heroine. Vibrant, colorful, energetic, irresistible. This is what you feel when for the first time you meet Blanca Li, dancer, choreographer, actress and filmmaker. She did actually work with her friend and compatriot Pedro Almodóvar as an actress for “Kika” and as a choreographer for his latest project: “I am so excited.” Her warm voice carries the musical accents of Granada, where she is originally from. Flamboyant Granada in southern Spain, where the Muslims confronted the Catholics to give birth to a multilayered, unique place in the world which transcended cultures. That echoes Blanca’s whole career: “To me, dance knows no boundaries or borders of form and style. It is a universal language.” Trained as a gymnast, she moved to Spanish Harlem, NYC, at 17 and discovered street dance. A revelation. “It gives a unique sense of freedom, of reactivity, of movement.” She created the popular Eighties’ flamenco-rap band Las Xoxones. After a stop in Madrid, where she opened a bar, Calentito, where she performed flamenco and cabaret on stage, she moved to Paris in 1993. Contemporary dance was in vogue in Paris and allowed her to create new ways of dancing in her dance company and her dance studios. She conceptualized numerous shows, notably “Nana and Lila”, about the Gnawa ceremonies in Marrakech; “The Dream of the Minotaur”, inspired by ancient Greek art; “Borderline”, about the 9/11 attacks; and “Poet in NY”, inspired by the poems of Federico García Lorca, to name just a few. Blanca places herself in her time with real, topical concerns. Artistic commitment does not prevent her being popular. On the contrary. She tours across the world. She directs shows in several opera houses: Paris, Berlin, New York amongst others. She involves herself in fashion shows and events for Stella McCartney, Hermès, Jean Paul Gaultier, H&M, Target; in advertising for Longchamp, Perrier, Gap, Prada etc.; or music videos for Beyoncé, Daft Punk, etc. She choreographs for the film industry: “Mood Indigo”, directed by Michel Gondry, “Pigalle”, a film by Karim Dridi. Indefatigable, Blanca likes to surround herself with young people, especially from rough Parisian suburbs, the kids for whom dance can help to lead to a new way of life. Throughout her career, she has witnessed a change in the way her art is perceived. From being seen as almost the same as prostitution, dancing is now considered a potential career on all levels of society. Her most recent show, “Robot!”, explores the relationship between machines and humans.” Society evolves so much around machines, I am worried about how and what it will be in 20, 30 years.”



IRIS BERBEN

“I’m on my way to the Holocaust memorial service at the Bundeswehr Military History Museum. I’ll be reading poetry by Selma Meerbaum-Eisinger, who died at 18 in Mikhailovka concentration camp in 1942.” This is how my conversation started with the award-winning German actress and vocal fighter against xenophobia, racism, anti-Semitism and right-wing violence. Born in 1950, Iris Berben felt uneasy early on at school when traces of World War II were everywhere, yet it was taboo to talk about it. She was expelled from three boarding schools. “They – the boarding schools – tried to keep you away from reality, from real everyday life, they didn’t allow you to form your own view of life.” She later moved in with friends in art school and starred in a couple of experimental films. Although the films were only shown in small festivals, a top film critic noticed the young Iris: “A talent I was not even aware I had. He led me to my first film. I went to Italy, then England. I never went to school, yet a career was blossoming. I thought I would be a lawyer. It took me a while to realize what an incredible profession acting is; to enter into people’s life stories and try to figure out other ways of living and thinking. It’s an amazing way of analyzing life and yourself.” Four decades later, Iris is a key figure in the German film and television industry with her roles of strong, self-assured female characters. Notably, she has been the chair of the German Film Academy since 2010. In 1968, student protests erupted all over Germany. “People were not willing to go into the next period of time without taking a chance to apologize – considering what had been done. 1968 allowed me to think about my German history.” She visited Israel for the first time. It was a life-changing experience. “I felt ashamed,” she confesses. She devoted herself to keeping the duty of memory alive. “The more influential I got, the more I thought about the right way to use my popularity. I am not an actress 24/7, but I am part of a community and we have a responsibility towards the society we are building.” Refusing to write her autobiography, instead she wrote a book entitled “Women Move the World”. She interviewed 24 women she admired. “I am known because of my profession. But around the planet, thousands and thousands of women do things to change the world, which we should know about. “ Fifteen years ago she created a Fund for Brain Science Study in the Hebrew University of Jerusalem: “The brain is the most important organ of our body. Through science, we can be connected all over the world”. She concludes, “Sometimes I get tired of fighting... but only for five minutes,” she adds with a laugh.





SHIRIN NESHAT

Shirin Neshat's New York studio is in a small, corner industrial building, between SoHo, landmark of a melting pot of bohemian artists, and Chinatown, an exported center of the Far East. This location isn't anodyne. It embodies the essence of Shirin's work. Shirin is an artist. A visual artist from Iran. A visual artist from Iran in exile. "I hope my work is a bridge between two cultures: Western and Middle Eastern. I function as a translator, conveying the meaning of one culture to the other as I find a visual language to communicate to both sensibilities. The two cultures aren't merely different; they are completely contradictory." Shirin grew up in the religious north of Iran, in a family where Western ideology was fantasized to the detriment of the Persian one. At 17, her father encouraged her to "be an individual and see the world". She left her home country for the U.S. to study arts. The Islamic revolution slowly but irrevocably settled in to culminate in 1979. When she visited her country again, 20 years had passed and Shirin was in shock. The new Iran, its rigid fundamentalism, clashed with the warmth of her memories. This personal experience became her vocation: Shirin explores the recurrent themes of exile, identity, femininity, martyrdom and freedom through photography, video, cinema, performance, theater, ballet. Prolific, she explores different forms of expression with fluidity as the constant traveller, the nomad she feels to be. "I hate nothing more than to be pinned into one identity. Am I a political artist? Well, I am a woman, I am Iranian. Political reality is so interconnected with our personal lives, you can't have the mental and emotional space to be distant from it." Iranian women therefore became her main subject of fascination, from "Women of Allah", which brought her fame 1993, to a film commissioned by Dior starring Natalie Portman. Her striking black and white portraits of herself and veiled women move her audience. They are ambiguous, unsettling but never didactic or insulting. The calligraphy used, Islamic art par excellence, is a feminine poetry written by women. It is powerfully loud, written on these silent faces. "From my early work to the women I photograph today, I can see history in making just by looking at them." Through her film adaptation of the novel "Women Without Men", she reminded us of the fateful events of 1953 in Iran. She won the Silver Lion for Best Director at the Venice Film Festival. Before leaving she tells me about her next project, a biopic on the greatest Arab star of all times, Umm Kulthum. "This is what the world needs now, a strong female symbol of unity," concludes her husband, Iranian artist Shoja Azari.

PATRICIA PILLAR

When the actress Patricia Pillar walks into the deserted factory that serves us as photo studio in Rio de Janeiro, the sun is setting and it has been a long day. Yet we instantly feel uplifted. It is thanks to Patricia's broad, sunny smile. She is a professional in front of the lens, throwing back her hair and moving gracefully. "I decided very early on I didn't want to lose time in my life. I had so many questions about what it takes to be a human being, how we are supposed to interact with each other. I first thought of becoming a psychiatrist or a journalist but acting, too, could offer me the chance of studying humankind as much as I wanted." At 16, she started a modeling career to pay for her acting classes. A role in the telenovela "Roque Santeiro", in 1985, brought her to the attention of the public. Over the last three decades she has appeared in numerous telenovelas and films, including the 1995 Academy Award-nominated "O'Quadrilho", and is today a key figure in the South American film industry. "Acting is a necessity. I fall in love with each character. If I didn't fall in love, I'd rather do something else." In 2008 she directed the documentary "Waldick, Always in My Heart", about the famous Seventies' Brazilian singer-songwriter Waldick Soriano. "He was a demi-god, then he was forgotten. From a very poor rural area of Brazil, Waldick found a way to talk to millions of people. The intellectuals chose to ignore him. This documentary was my way of exploring the feeling of oblivion." In 2001, at 37, after a self-examination, Patricia found out she had a malignant lump in her breast. The tumor was removed and Patricia decided to publicize it, appearing with a shaven head at various events: "It may encourage other women to be more aware of prevention and cancer treatments." During the same time, Patricia became actively involved in the presidential campaign of her (now former) husband, the socialist Cico Gomes. She feels optimistic about the new era in Brazil. The 2013 protests were very important. "Democracy is young in Brazil. It is still weak but we are improving it. The former generation was all about being more individualist and profit-seeking. But young people today are more aware, more conscious. They are right to question the establishment."





OFELIA MEDINA

“The first highlight of my life was to have been conceived in a hammock while Perez Prado’s ‘Pink Cherry’ filled the air, in the old city of Mérida, Yucatán, Mexico.” This is the first sentence of Ofelia’s email. It says it all. The Mexican actress and human-rights fighter Ofelia Medina is passionate, without concessions. She is a vibrant echo of one of her compatriots who would have a major impact on her life: the painter Frida Kahlo (“I was born a bitch, I was born a painter”). At 11, few major events occurred: she started pantomime lessons with Alejandro Jodorowsky; she heard the words communist, anarchist, “rojillos” (mild left-winger) and Indians for the first time and felt attracted to what they meant; and she encountered Frida Kahlo’s work through a visit to the Casa Azul. In 1984, she managed to convince the director Paul Leduc that she was his Frida Kahlo. “I am very proud of having made ‘Frida Naturaleza Viva’ when almost nobody knew about ‘La Fridita.’” It made her famous all over Mexico. Vocal about the injustices she witnesses against the indigenous people in Mexico, especially in her home state, Yucatán, she created the Committee of Solidarity with Ethnic Groups. Death threats from landowners allied with some government members did not stop her creating the Fund for the Health of Indigenous Children in 1990. “The government of my country pays enormous amounts of money to hide that we are living in a state of civil war. We feel prisoners of corruption and immorality and sometimes it feels like justice doesn’t exist. It’s very painful to live in a country where 40,000 babies die of malnutrition while the richest man in the world is Mexican.” She became close to the Zapatista Community and with them created a food program in Chiapas in 1994. The Chiapas government declared her persona non grata. It didn’t stop her acting career from flourishing. Ofelia decided to explore writing. She wrote and starred in “Las Buenas Hierbas” which earned her the Marco Aurelio Award for Best Actress at the Rome Film Festival. She explored erotic poetry on stage and on the radio. She has acted in numerous episodes of tv series. Over the past decade she has devoted herself to teaching. “I see myself more as a guide, I love to learn everyday about life and human relationships and to work in a creative collective. Am I a feminist? Well I truly believe the masculine era is over and we are stepping into a feminine one. Instead of the word ‘empowering’ women I rather use ‘embracing’ and ‘comprehending’. Women are the backbone of Mexican society, I feel sad to say Mexican men have caused a lot of damage. But when women are liberated they make profound changes in lives, and not only ideologically.”

DORA BOUCHOUCHA

“The core of my job is finding a thin red line: that thin red line at the heart of each tale an author or a filmmaker is trying to tell.” This is how producer Dora Bouchoucha describes her job. Nothing predestinated her in her native Tunisia to become one of the most respected, prolific and well-known producers of the region. “I never thought of being a producer. Actually, if someone had explained to me what it was before I began, I would have probably shied away from the difficulties. She grew up in the rural area just outside the capital, Tunis. She spent her childhood playing in the only orphanage of the country, where her father was a director, and next door to the only psychiatric hospital. Her mother was a social worker. “I was always exposed to human tragedy: single mothers, adoptions... Throughout my childhood, this nourished my imagination. Human stories make me feel alive. But I never felt the need to invent my own stories, I was always more attracted by helping others to tell theirs. I also have always admired my mother, a free, modern woman who spent her life helping and educating poor women across the country. And today, helping and giving comes completely naturally to me.” Producing is what makes a film happen. Dora started her career as a lecturer in English Literature at the University of Tunis and translated film scripts on the side. In 1994, she founded her production company, Nomadis Images, and most of the films she has produced since have premiered in Cannes, Venice or Berlin and have won many international awards. “From the beginning, I understood that the weak point in African and Arab cinema was the screenplay. It is very difficult in our part of the world to go from a written text to an image”. This led her to found Sud Ecriture, a screenwriting lab which has been emulated throughout the world today. For years, she has headed the Carthage Film Festival, which is the most important festival of African and Arab cinema. She has also been appointed chair of Fonds Sud and chair of Aide aux Cinémas du Monde, production funds that France gives to countries in Eastern Europe, Asia, Africa and Latin America. In 2011, Tunisia was shaken by revolution and society was profoundly transformed. Dora produced several documentaries: “History is recorded through personal stories, we are building the memories of future generations. Fiction needs more time, more distance.” Today, she is involved in several human rights battles, especially concerning women. “Before the revolution, I did not support all these women’s rights organizations as they were used only as a propaganda tool by the regime, but with our new-found freedom and the rise of fundamentalism, it is my duty to fight for the legacy I will leave to my daughters. Today I am no longer afraid. Civil society in Tunisia is unique, it will never give up the struggle for freedom.”





NADINE LABAKI

Nadine Labaki is in Rio, directing and starring with Harvey Keitel in a segment for “Rio, I Love You”. It is far from her native Lebanon, but Nadine likes the challenge: “It’s a real human experience. I accepted this project because I was curious to test myself with a culture, codes and a language different from mine.” Challenges have always been attractive to Nadine. Born in a country “with no film industry, that has been at war for a very long time. We grew up feeling that nothing great would ever happen to us.” She graduated in audiovisual studies and began her career directing hugely popular commercials and music videos. “Making music videos was a way of expressing myself differently. I created these examples of liberated, unafraid women who are comfortable in their own skin.” It was audacious, controversial. In 2007, she premiered in Cannes with “Caramel”, a film she wrote, directed and starred in. “Caramel” is a poetic tale about a hair salon in Beirut and its female workers and customers. Women are magnified through Nadine’s lens. “Talking about women comes to me naturally, instinctively. But it’s also the inspiration of the moment. More than anything, as a human being, as a mother, too, I feel the urge to express my point of view.” Her second film, “Where Do We Go Now?”, was also released in Cannes, in 2011. It deals with the relationship between Muslims and Christians in a small village in northern Lebanon. “I am permeated with this mixture of different cultures, ways of life and traditions that have always coexisted.” The film is humorous and delicately tragic. “Our culture in the Middle East is to live very close to one another in a closed society. Restrictions are all around us and thus we develop a sense of self-censorship. One learns to be sometimes provocative but not too direct, using humor, cynicism. It develops the imagination. I have to use tricks in order to be heard.” Both films were huge critical and commercial successes and Nadine is now one of the most successful Arab film-makers. Acting came later. “At first, it was more of a new kind of challenge. I felt close to the roles I wrote, but after a while I was attracted by the idea of interpreting roles. It grew from a desire to escape one’s normal reality, one’s own personality. Cinema is the only place where it is legal to express several personalities.” She is involved in several NGOs, notably denouncing the growing difficulties of the situation of refugees in Lebanon. She embraces this new era in the Middle East with optimism. “Thanks to social networks, there is an interesting and accessible exchange. People enjoy exchanging success stories. There is an awakening, a genuine will for a better world, a huge expansion of ideas and points of view and a contagious desire to do good around oneself.”



SANDRA DEN HAMER

“Cinema is a cheap ticket to world travelling,” states Sandra den Hamer, director of the EYE Film Institute Netherlands of Amsterdam. “Dutch people are in general open and very curious and you can learn a lot through films.” EYE, an iconic building and a new cultural landmark in Amsterdam, is emblematic of the importance of film culture in the Netherlands. It boasts more than 40,000 films in its archives. The atmosphere is faithful to the laid-back attitude that is so typically Dutch. It is an open space where children, fine artists, amateurs and connoisseurs mix to discover all kinds of films, from experimental to mainstream. While still a student in film and theater sciences in need of extra money, Sandra began her career with Hubert Bals. The legendary godfather of Dutch cinema and founder of the International Film Festival Rotterdam transmitted his taste and passion for the arts and world cinema to her. Already in the early Eighties he was convinced that “the future of cinema was not to be expected from Europe or the States but far more from Asia, South America and Africa”. For 23 years she led the International Film Festival Rotterdam, one of the largest audience- and industry-driven film festivals in the world. IFFR is famous for its conviviality and its innovative spirit: “More than glamorous, we wanted the festival to be a very warm, inspiring place for people to meet.” She headed CineMart for several years, the first platform of its kind to offer filmmakers the opportunity to launch their ideas to the international film industry and to find the right connections to get their projects financed. A market where filmmakers come from all over the world to pitch their projects. Every major festival has now copied this model of a coproduction market. She also founded the Hubert Bals Fund which provides grants for worthy cinema projects in various stages of completion. “But we’ve been through difficult times in these last few decades. The Netherlands opened up to immigration and Dutch society changed. It led to protectionism by certain radical political groups. It culminated in the assassination of Theo van Gogh. This fear of the unknown was exactly the opposite of our ideology at the Festival, which was all about discovering the unknown. Today things are getting better.” EYE, which is now two years old, is engaged in sustainability. Situated in the northern part of Amsterdam, multicultural, it is committed to its neighborhood. “As an institution, we have a responsibility towards society. It is important to work with and for the community.” EYE focuses on education: “Kids learn to read but nobody teaches them how to watch. It is very important to develop these skills as most children now watch films more than they read.” “In the Dutch film landscape, women have key roles and it is functioning well because we have a powerful sense of working together. I hope it sets an example for other industries.”





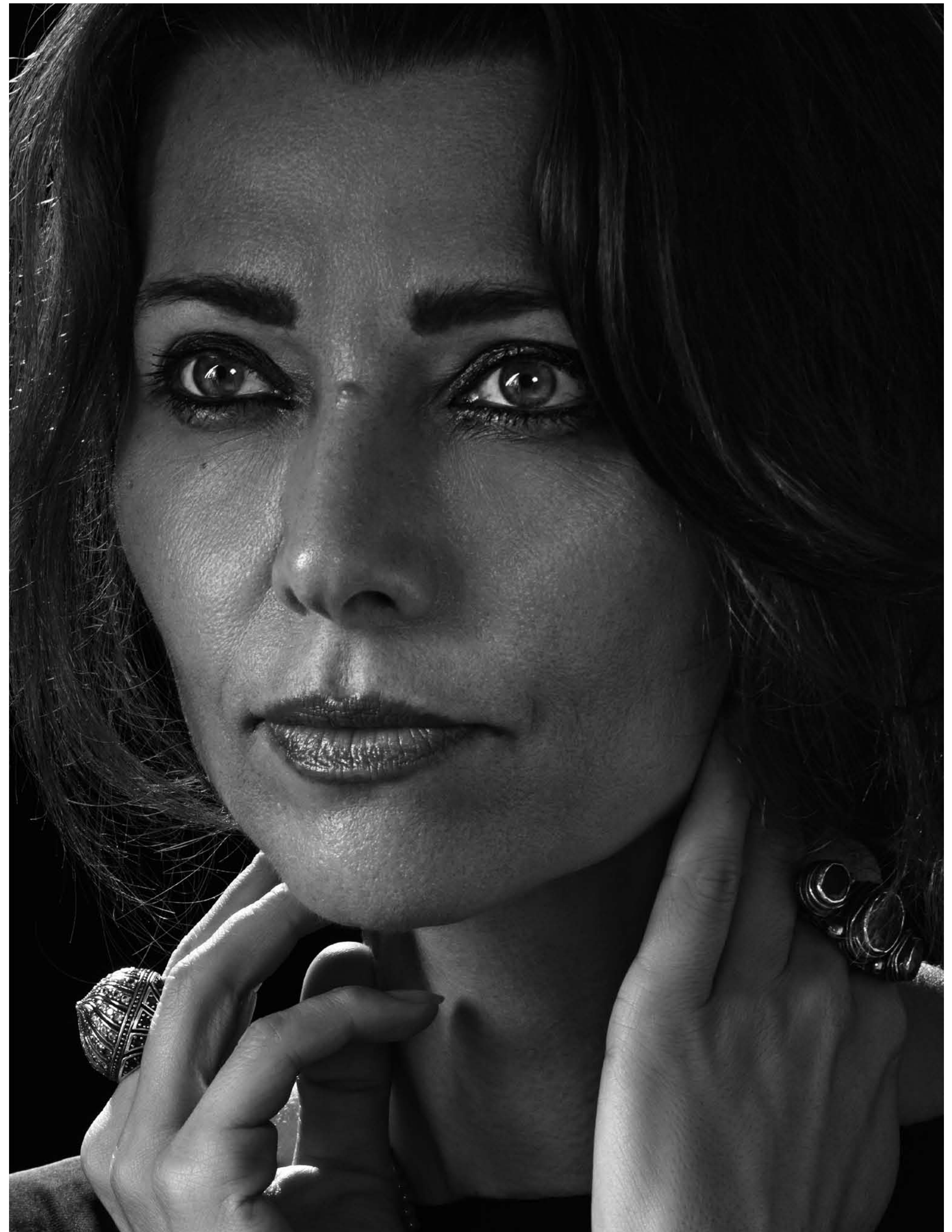
YOANI SÁNCHEZ

“Your blog provides the world with a unique window into the realities of daily life in Cuba. It is telling that the Internet has provided you and other courageous Cuban bloggers with an outlet to express themselves.” This is how President Obama began his answer to Cuban dissident blogger Yoani Sánchez’s questions in 2008. The same year, “Time” magazine listed her as one of the world’s 100 most influential people. Yet blogging started as a kind of self-therapy: her initial purpose was to create an aid to help her deal with the frustrations she felt with the situation in Cuba. “I tried silence, yoga and gym with no results. Blogging ended up being my mean to express my frustrations.” High school and university left a sour taste in young Yoani’s mouth: “I left high school in the countryside feeling that nothing belonged to me, not even my body. Living in shelters creates the sensation that your whole life, your privacy, your personal possessions and even your nakedness have become public property.” She studied philology in Havana: “At first, I wanted to study journalism, but my passion for books led me to the faculty of philology. Although I have a strong inclination for technology, my love of language and words prevailed. But one day I discovered that I could bring both passions together if I opened an Internet site. And nobody in the cyberspace could restrict my freedom of speech.” At the end of her studies, Yoani realized that the world of intellectualism and high culture “disgusted” her. After two years spent in Switzerland, Yoani got specialized in computer science and helped establish a digital magazine called “Consenso” (Spanish for “consensus”), which was based on reflection and debate and was a vehicle for reporting news. She founded “Voces Cubanas”, a citizen journalism project seeking to provide a multimedia platform for independent bloggers in Cuba. Her own blog “Generation Y” was created in 2008, and Yoani took the decision to renounce to anonymity. In 2014, she launched the first independent digital media outlet called “14ymedio”. She continued to face harsh censorship that she bypassed through a system she described as “a citizen network”, consisting of people outside Cuba who helped distribute her posts. While the blog’s popularity grew worldwide, it being translated in several languages, Yoani faced more and more intimidation, culminating in a kidnapping attempt in 2009. The incident was condemned by the US administration and by Human Rights Watch. Yet, Yoani strives to maintain a respectful tone: “I refuse to use incendiary language, defamation or harangues, because that only exacerbates the cycle of intolerance that is an obstacle to reasoned debate.” She hid half of her face for the portrait, a symbolic gesture she thus explains: “I’ve always wanted to expose through my writings that hidden side of the Cuban reality. It is a face that is always covered by stereotypes or official propaganda, but it hides the true joys and pains that we experience everyday.”



ELIF ŞAFAK

“Literature is a way of connecting with the Other and understanding that the Other is me.” This is how Turkey best-selling female writer Elif Şafak describes her vocation. “Literature is about imagination, freedom and empathy. It just transcends all boundaries.” Born in Strasbourg, France, Elif grew up between Madrid and Amman before moving to Turkey. She was raised by a single, modern, educated mother and a traditional, religious grandmother. The fact that she did not grow up in a typical patriarchal family had a great impact on her work. She notably chose her mother’s first name, Şafak – Turkish for “dawn” –, as her pen name. “Turkey is misogynistic, sexist and homophobic. However, the fact that we live in a patriarchal society doesn’t mean there are no strong women. Just the opposite, we have lots of strong, influential Turkish and Kurdish women in Turkey. I am a big believer in sisterhood.” Elif has published thirteen books, nine of which are novels. Her books have been translated in more than forty countries. She is a “writer who weds the Modern and the Mystic”. She blends the Western and the Eastern traditions of storytelling, bringing out myriads of stories of women, minorities, immigrants, subcultures, youth and global souls. Sufism is a leitmotiv in her body of work: “Sufism makes you erase what you know, what you are so sure of. Then it makes you start thinking again. This time, however, not with your mind, but with your heart.” The same applies to Istanbul: “It’s a city that makes one comprehend, perhaps not intellectually but intuitively, that the East and the West are ultimately imaginary concepts and can be, therefore, de-imagined and re-imagined.” In 2006, she gave birth to her daughter and suffered from postnatal depression. This became the subject of her memoir “Black Milk”. “The book shows that mother’s milk is not always as white and spotless as society likes to think it is. Besides, that depression inspired me, and I was able to develop some sort of ink.” She writes in two languages, Turkish and English, because she loves commuting between languages the way she loves commuting between cities, cultures and worlds. This caused a stir in Turkey, where the ultra-nationalists accused her of abandoning her mother tongue. “The problem with the followers of extremist ideologies is they always think in ‘either-or’ terms. They believe you must either be this or that. But what I say is that we can, should be multiple. We are plural.” Elif is also a vocal columnist, a speaker and an academic specialized in political science. She is a prominent presence in social media. “In countries where democracy is wobbly and where media don’t enjoy much freedom, social media become more important and more politicized.” Elif is a fervent advocate for women’s and minorities’ rights and for freedom of expression. As a writer, she comments: “I am more interested in showing what we have in common as fellow human beings than in adding yet another brick to the imaginary walls erected between cultures, religions and ethnicities. In this new century we need people who can appreciate the local and the universal at the same time. We need people who can unite and build bridges.”





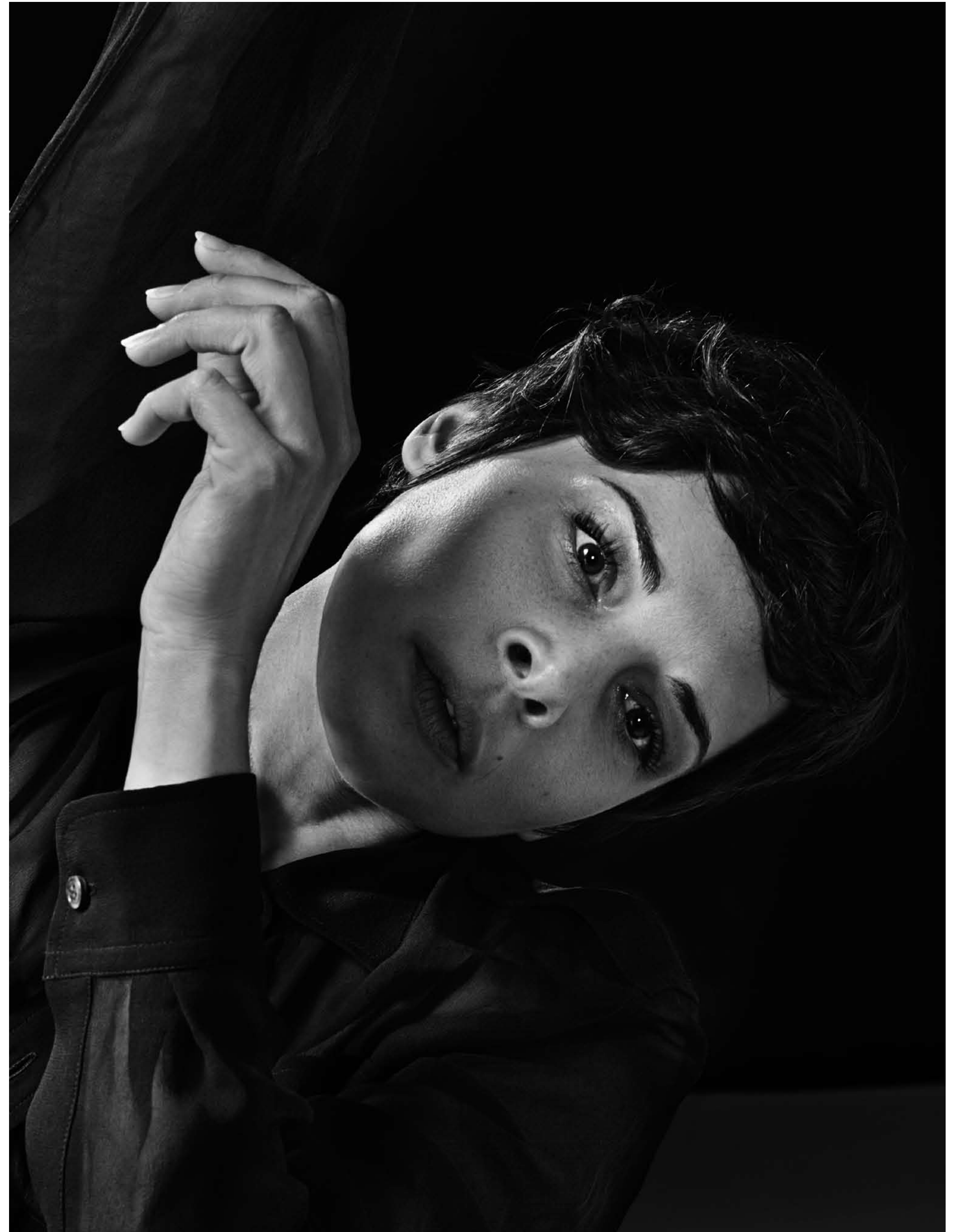
PRINCESS RYM

“There has been so much achieved by amazing women throughout the world. I have been inspired and impressed by how resourceful so many women around me are. My hat goes off to these women, who always find ways of moving forward for themselves and then for their daughters, no matter what.” These words she spoke could easily apply to her, Her Royal Highness Princess Rym of Jordan. Princess Rym grew up between Great Britain and Algeria where her father Lakhdar Brahimi is from. He is one of the most prominent Algerian United Nations and Arab League diplomats. “Thanks to my father’s work, while growing up we were fortunate enough to meet many first-rate journalists, and listening to the stories of the events they had covered, witnessed and reported on inspired me to do the same.” She studied political science and journalism in Paris, then at Columbia University in NYC. She was working for CNN in London when she met her husband, Prince Ali of Jordan, King Abdullah’s younger brother. They got married in 2004 in Amman, and Princess Rym gave birth to Princess Jalilah in 2005 and Prince Abdullah in 2007. “Having lived both in the East and the West helped me understand some of the differences, but it also helped me see the similarities and maybe the nuances. There are so many different Easts and so many different Wests. I truly believe in our common humanity. The differences in culture just add to its beauty.” She founded the Jordan Media Institute (JMI) in 2007, a program offering a high level of professional training for the journalists of the region. “It is unique because it is in Arabic and it is a very intensive practical degree. The aim is to uphold new professional standards in the Arab Media. A truly high-level professional media is what a healthy society needs, so I hope, in that respect, that JMI can make a positive contribution in Jordan and the region at large.” Since 2006, Princess Rym is also the Executive Commissioner of the Royal Film Commission, established to develop an internationally competitive Jordanian Film Industry. “It is very important that we express ourselves, our culture and our opinions so that the rest of the world can better understand us at this crucial time and we can be proud of our own heritage.” Her numerous awards, from Columbia University’s Alumni Award to the French Knight of the Legion of Honour amongst others, do not divert her from her work and the core values she believes in: “Women in our part of the world have so much more to prove to make it into the professional world and so much more to juggle with. It is crucial to have educated women who, in turn, will educate their sons and daughters, so that we can overcome ignorance, that often leads to misunderstanding, violence and all forms of extremism.”



MELANIE DE BIASIO

“My vocation is to create a setting, a space where the others may travel. Every song is a step on the journey. I want to make records that allow you to dream,” says acclaimed jazz singer and flutist Melanie De Biasio. Her voice is smoky, sultry, low. With her deep dark eyes fixed on you, Melanie takes her time to talk, to express her thoughts: “Tempo is so important. There is a storytelling in each record but tempo gives you space to think.” Melanie grew up in Charleroi, Belgium. She was an absent, dreaming child for whom school was lacking all sense of reality. “I didn’t understand why they were asking us to learn all of this.” She felt connected to reality through music. “Music is a language we learn to be able to share together, to communicate.” She entered the academy at eight and there she decided to learn western flute. “It reminded me of my voice. The flute felt like an extension of my child voice.” She toured Canada at twelve with the Harmonic Orchestra of Charleroi. “It taught me to accept discipline, to be totally engaged in my passion.” Her labourer family listened to music all the time. Her paternal grandmother, “la nonna”, an Italian immigrant, had the radio for sole companion: Italian music, operas, great voices were always playing. Her maternal grandfather, instrumentalist and musician, worked hard all week at the factory to be able to tour and play at popular balls during the weekends: “It was his evasion, his bubble to breath.” Her parents supported her decision to pursue her passion. They asked, though, for a traditional curriculum, “validated by the government”. At eighteen, Melanie was accepted into the Conservatoire Royal of Brussels. The conservatory experience offered her the chance to meet musicians she continued to work with during the recording of her first album, “A Stomach Is Burning”, her second album, “No Deal”, and her various tours around the world. “They categorize me as a jazz singer, but I also play jazz. Because what I do is collective, organic, improvised music based on Blues and whispers.” Every concert is unique because Melanie prepares her set thirty minutes before the show “depending on the venue, the acoustic, how I feel that night, how I feel my public.” Although very organic, Melanie is attentive to every detail, to scenography, to the lights... The sound and lighting engineers are part of the band. “Music is influenced by the light. The experience is complete, circular. We are in front playing music and the sound and lighting engineers are behind the public. You are part of a process, and it’s beautiful to be permeable, porous to love, to the context, the venue.” She was called the “Belgian Billie Holiday” and also the “new Nina Simone”. But Melanie replies: “It’s nothing to do with me. I know today my role is to be the cord between the people and the Harmony of Sound. It freed me. I have no reason to fear going on stage every night. It gives me pride and a total freedom of senses.”





PRUNE NOURRY

“The myth of Pygmalion, to give life to your sculpture is a constant obsession for sculptors.” In all of her projects and performances, French sculptor Prune Nourry re-explores the edges of Ovid’s most celebrated poem. “If you put a big hat over all of my projects, it would be about a recurrent questioning of Humanity, its definition, its characteristics, its genders...” Prune always knew she wanted to become an artist. “I tried drawing until I discovered sculpture, which is the pillar of my vocation.” She studied wood sculpture at the École Boulle, a renowned arts and crafts school in Paris. “I already knew it wasn’t my destiny to become an artisan, but I wanted to acquire a solid technique. The concepts of your projects are then more intimate.” She started working straight away. In one of her first projects, “Les Bébés Domestiques”, she created hybrid figurines, part children, part dogs, reflecting on the ideas of pet fetishisation and genetic manipulation. During the “Adoption Day” events, she took the Bébés sculptures into the streets, distributed “adoption forms” and recorded the whole process until the Bébés were adopted by different selected families. The experience blurred the line between the customary roles of spectator and actor in a typical art project. In “Holy Daughters”, in India, with hybrid creatures, half cow, half girl, she invited viewers to reassess the parallel between the sacred animal, symbol of fertility, and the depreciated condition of the woman. She kept this model for her body of work, closely interacting for each project with sociologists, anthropologists, scientists... “My work is like a tree. The roots is my research, my archives, my interviews with scientists, etc. The trunk is the sculptures, to which I like to keep a dimension of ephemera. The branches are the works issued from the trunk, the videos, the performances and installations I take with me all over the world.” She keeps walking the line between art and activism, bringing attention to some of the preoccupying issues that arise from our fast growing scientific discoveries. Offering a participatory art experience to viewers is essential for her. “I don’t like being stuck in one case, I like working with different materials and media, going to untouched zones, mixing different fields with sciences, gastronomy, sociology, handicraft. Being a bridge between very different fields enriches me. I find coherence and harmony in all. The ethics, the visions and the tools are often common. Words, forms are different, yet the core is the same.” She humorously played with these grey zones in “Spermbar”, in 2011. Men were symbolically invited to donate their sperm. Associating each donor trait to an ingredient, then she offered them to passers-by in a traditional food cart in New York. The questioning of time is another recurrent theme. In one of her latest projects, “Terracotta Daughters”, she created an army of 108 life-size bronze Chinese orphan girls that will be buried in the ground, in China, to be finally unearthed in 2030, a reflection on the idea of continuity and the urgent question of gender imbalance. Prolific, Prune’s projects come one after the other, issued from one another, organically. “You have to detach from your sculpture to move to the next one, yet you have to keep the integrity of what you have created until now. The past also allows to finance the future. When you finish a piece of work, you feel like Pygmalion: there is a moment when you feel your sculpture lives beyond you, a key moment when it doesn’t belong to you anymore.”

BAHIJA JALLAL

As a young girl in Morocco, I was always curious. I perpetually asked ‘why?’. Now it makes sense. Asking why is the foundation of science. The research I have been carrying on for almost twenty years is based on whys.” Bahija Jallal is Executive Vice President of MedImmune, one of the most prominent cancer research institutes in the world. “My career has been a journey, not a destination. Yet I didn’t have it easy. I owe it all to my mother.” Her mother, illiterate and a widow at a young age, encouraged her seven children to study seriously and, more importantly, to study the subjects they found compelling. “It is very important to pursue your dreams. Science has always been my passion.” She left Rabat to pursue undergraduate and graduate studies in biology and physiology at Paris University. She did her postdoctoral work in Munich at the Institute of Biochemistry, where she met her husband, who is also oncologist. She moved to California to work for two major biotechnology firms, Sugen and Chiron, before settling down in Maryland to work for MedImmune. Today, Bahija manages three labs: in Maryland, in California and in the UK. Her articles and conferences are regarded as authoritative all over the world. She has at heart to teach voluntarily at the John Hopkins University and Maryland University. “It makes me happy to help youngsters and boost their confidence. It is the key to success. I feel it is my duty to help, to give back to society.” Her research works are on cancer, diabetes, auto-immune diseases and asthma. “As long as there are diseases and ill people, I will keep working hard. It is a huge responsibility to manage 3000 people, but I feel privileged, because I found what makes me jump out of bed in the morning. I feel fulfilled.” Her impetuous enthusiasm and unbreakable optimism are contagious. “The best is yet to come. Ongoing clinical trials at MedImmune are likely to seriously revolutionize modern medicine. Today we are working directly on the immune system, which has a memory. We inject a type of vaccine. Somehow we introduce the tumour to the immune system, so it can remember and avoid recurrences. The results are very encouraging. We hope to offer a new treatment in 2016.” In a mainly male field, Bahija believes women bring a diversity of thoughts which is what it takes to solve the world’s problems. She has transmitted her values to her daughters, one of whom is studying law, the other medicine. “Ever since my two daughters were children, I have told them never to apologize for being smart and to always seek knowledge. As the American businessman Warren Buffett once said: ‘Women should not hold themselves back. Nobody should hold them back.’”





STACEYANN CHIN

“Oppression is somehow connected. It is the same power that prevents gays from loving, or black people, women and discriminated groups from getting what they need, from being equally paid or from gaining access to the resources necessary to fulfil their dreams.” The poetess and activist Staceyann Chin raises an outcry. “I feel passionate about equality and safety for everyone. I became a sort of poet for these causes.” Staceyann suffered discrimination to its paroxysm. At 24, in her native Jamaica, when she was exploring her sexuality at the college, she made the decision to come out. A group of young men sexually assaulted her. The trauma made her move to New York. There, while trying to figure out her life, she approached the local gay community. She immediately felt compelled by the activist scene emerging from the community. “As I was living as an exile, away from my country, I felt connected to the people who were oppressed. I found my voice. I met people from Jordan, from Africa, from different backgrounds, and my lens began to widen.” Her words started to resonate. She was featured in the “New York Times”, the “Washington Post”, the iconic TV news-magazine “60 Minutes”... She wrote and performed on and off Broadway shows. She held poetry workshops worldwide. “Unlike in Jamaica, where I had no room to feel my own voice, I felt everyday more powerful. Together with this power came the respect of my peers. Today I feel lucky and thankful for the amazing journey I am taking. It’s an incredible experience to travel the world, to work with the most amazing artists and thinkers, to stand in resistance with other activists in Kenya, in South Africa, in Australia, in Germany...” Her outbursts of passion have no frontiers or single forms. “You can’t measure someone’s passion. I feel compelled by injustice in general. The problem is how media are selective about what they decide to highlight.” She has mixed feelings about social media. “I am excited for the power they give to ordinary people to amplify their own voices, but I also understand that, at some point, the corporations, the invisible powers that can exert real influence, will try to make sure power stays with them.” She pauses, then adds with her clear, distinct voice, lightly intoned with the singing accent of the Caribbean: “The shift is happening, though, the power of resistance keeps rising. I believe in the power of people and its perpetuity. We just need to remain vigilant.” In 2011, she went through the challenging and life-altering experience of pregnancy. “I thought that when I got pregnant, I would be conflicted about the issue of abortion because of my past experience. But it was such a life-changing experience. It metamorphosed my body, my life, my soul so much that it actually reinforced my commitment to the women that want to have this choice. I couldn’t imagine for a second being pregnant when I don’t want to be.” While evoking her daughter, Staceyann voice softens. “My child made my life bigger. I didn’t know I could love this hard, this open, this wide. I certainly didn’t anticipate living in a world where my own heartbeats exist outside my body. I am learning to love someone without asking very much in return, you are powerless in the face of the love you have for your child.”



HIAM ABBASS

“Cinema is one of the most powerful tool to communicate, to share. It allows us to question ourselves at so many levels. It breaks clichés. It gives broader, more comprehensive points of view and perspectives. We get more depth in films than in any other media. We dare more. And this is what guides me. It is my vocation.” Palestinian actress and director Hiam Abbass is passionate. Her onyx eyes, shaped in a finely-chiselled face, penetrate you. It diverts you from noticing how elegantly she moves around, how sensual she can be. Cinema-goers discovered it when they saw her in one of her breaking roles, the one in the Tunisian film “Satin Rouge”, where she portrays a woman that discovers her attraction and talent for belly dancing in a cabaret of Tunis backstreets. Hiam was born in Nazareth, Israel. When a teenager, she juggled school and theatre, but at the college she decided not to enroll in an acting school because “it would have to be in Hebrew and that didn’t really interest me. I was fascinated by art in general”. She studied photography, instead, and moved to Jerusalem, where she started to photograph the plays of the renowned stage director François Abou Salem. One day he suddenly asked her to replace one of the actresses: after a week, she was on stage every night. They performed in Lyon, France, and Hiam immediately rediscovered her passion for acting. “From then on, I combined photography and theatre, but theatre slowly took over until I had the confidence to really consider myself an actress and I let go photography.” In 1988, she settled in London, but in 1989 she moved to Paris. There she met the father of her two daughters. “I never thought I would leave Jerusalem for good. I just needed to breath and travel to be inspired again. Life just took a different turn.” Her career flourished, knowing no frontiers: from the acclaimed “Paradise Now” by Palestinian Hany Abu-Assad to “Free Zone” by Israeli Amos Gitai, from “The Source” by Romanian Radu Mihaileanu to “Persécution” by French Patrice Chéreau. She also flirted with American independent cinema, starring in Jim Jarmusch’s “The Limits of Control” and Julian Schnabel’s “Miral”, and even with Hollywood, playing a role in “Munich” by Steven Spielberg. Her filmography is diverse and prolific. “When I choose a film I’m always guided by stories and strong characters. I feel an urge to be their voices. I don’t believe in passports, yet my blood is Palestinian and this is deeply entangled in my identity. I feel it’s important to depict human stories about Palestinians, Israelis, the war or the Arab woman in order to widen the sometimes truncated vision the western world has of us. I don’t define myself as a militant but as an actress compelled by social and political contexts and all kinds of injustice. And by dreams, also.” In 2001 she wrote and directed her first short film, “Le Pain”, and this led her to her first feature film, “The Inheritance”, shot in the north of Galilee, with the backdrop of the raging war between Israel and Lebanon. “I needed another form of expression. Between photography and acting, I found a way to convey it all. Yes, I was born in a conflict, but I am also interested in what lays beyond. Each project I take on is a defy to what will open my eyes wider, to what will provoke a deeper reflection, to what will nourish me next.”



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